

Languages Leverage Learning & Life Skills

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THE harnessing of Australia's rich linguistic resources is inhibited by a dominant monolingual mindset. There are many more people in the world who are bilingual or multilingual, yet the assumed dominance of monolingualism underlies several language fallacies popular in Australia.

The first is the crowded curriculum fallacy, which suggests there's no space or time for a second language. Languages are a key learning area but are treated as inferior to other key learning areas. Many other countries do not consider their curriculums too crowded to include two languages other than the first.

In Finland, where school students consistently perform better than Australians in international comparative assessments across the curriculum, all children take three languages throughout schooling, 44 per cent a fourth language and 31 per cent a fifth. In The Netherlands, 99 per cent of Year12 students are learning a second language, 41 per cent a third and 21 per cent a fourth.

There is evidence that bilingual students approach the task of learning another language differently to monolingual students because they have a better understanding of how language works. Australia has 13.4 per cent continuing a second language to Year12 (with a range from 5.8 per cent in Queensland to 20.2 per cent in Victoria).

Closely related to the complaint of the crowded curriculum is the monoliteracy fallacy: that literacy must be acquired through English only. This underlies the argument that learning a second language takes away time from literacy acquisition. It denies the overwhelming evidence of literacy transfer between languages (even those with different writing systems) and of literacy being enhanced by preoccupation with any language.

This is borne out by children in primary bilingual programs with fewer hours of English outperforming comparable children in English in Victorian statewide testing.

The "global English is enough" fallacy originated with English monolinguals. However, for most people in the world today, English is a second language. Monolingualism is not an advantageous basis for intercultural understanding and communication.

Yet Australia has a unique range of languages that could be built on for international communication. The 2001 census, the latest to be processed, indicates that 16 per cent of the population (29 per cent in Sydney and 27 per cent in Melbourne) speak a language other than English at home.

About 240 languages are used, including 64 indigenous languages and 170 languages from all corners of the earth that have come with migrants. Ten of Australia's 20 most widely used community languages are among the 20 top languages of the world. They include languages identified as being economically important to Australia, such as Mandarin, Korean, Spanish and Arabic.

As some of the older community languages from Europe decline as languages spoken at home, those from Asia (such as Mandarin, Hindi, Korean, Vietnamese) are greatly increasing in numbers of users in Australia.

Each capital city is developing its own sociolinguistic profile. In the school-age population, the predominant community languages that stand out are Vietnamese (throughout Australia) and Arabic (especially in Sydney). Yet the new demography has hardly been taken into account in language offerings in schools.

Bilingualism is worth fostering and transmitting. The international literature attributes to bilingual children a better understanding of the arbitrary nature of language, more divergent thinking and more efficient neural activity. This is due to switching between languages and having referents with different names in each language. Apart from cognitive benefits, there are social, cultural and economic advantages of bilingualism. The development of bilingualism in children of migrant background enhances their development of a high level of proficiency in the community language and opens doors. Language is a key to culture and bilingualism a key to an understanding of cultural relativity. Australia, with English as its national language, has the opportunity of building on its resources to develop skills in many second languages. Yet a study published in 2000 showed that Australian chief executives were proficient in fewer languages than those of the 27 other countries surveyed, including the US, Britain and New Zealand.

Developing our multilingual potential requires a collaborative strategy on the part of many institutions, including governments, schools, universities, families and ethnic communities. Universities need to offer a larger range of languages, taking into account language demography; some language programs have been closed down in the wake of rationalisation and are now not available anywhere in Australia (such as Dutch, Khmer, Maltese, Slovenian); others (including African languages) have never been introduced. For this they will need targeted government funding. Distance education and overseas exchanges can complement in-house offerings. There has been a decrease in courses in bilingualism and specialist staff in the field.

This will severely compromise the relationship between research and policy. It is also imperative that all Australian teacher trainees and language specialists be equipped with knowledge of the nature of bilingualism. It is the cost of monolingualism - not of multilingualism - that Australia cannot afford.

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